

Fact File

Language provides another example of Indonesia's diversity. There are approximately 583 dialects, many of which are still widely spoken.

For centuries Bahasa Malayu had been a means of communication between the different ethnic groups throughout much of South-East Asia. Since it was already widely used in Indonesia and was not associated with any particular ethnic group, it was selected in 1928 as the official 'language of unity' and called Bahasa Indonesia.

Today, the difference between Bahasa Malayu and Bahasa Indonesia is like the difference between British English and American English. They are both understood, but contain some differences in spelling and vocabulary.

Bahasa Indonesia was originally a trading language used by people from different language groups as a way to communicate. As a result, it has absorbed many words from the different groups that have had contact with Indonesia over the centuries. The early contact and strong influence of Indian traders and culture introduced many Sanskrit words. Arabic words often deal with religion, and words from Chinese and Hindi are usually concerned with food or trade. Words derived from Portuguese are mainly connected with things the early European traders brought with them, and the Dutch colonisers also left behind many words. It is a dynamic language that is continually evolving.

Some words come from English and you may easily be able to guess what they mean; for example, *tiket*, *turis* or *kredit*. But watch out! Not every word has the meaning you would expect; for example, *jam* means 'o'clock' and *air* means 'water'!